

Burning Bright

Fergus Bannon

“Guess what I found, Professor?” When Mikey smiled his skin patterning made him look like a tree with teeth.

Still bleary from a long night's sleep, I peered into the cramped Lander's main viewpit with its perspective on the caldera. Most of the pit was filled with a 3-D back-projection of the scene below the water but an inset volume gave a wider perspective. In it the distant blue-white sun was getting low, making the caldera's jagged lip cast razor-sharp shadows across the water.

Careful scrutiny doesn't always pay in this game. Sometimes it's best to shift focus so that you're looking a little beyond. That way you don't get hung up on details. And sure enough as I stared blankly at the underwater scene I became aware of the incomplete pyramidal shapes lurking beneath the extravagant organic filigree and the overhanging collateral structures.

“Shit! Where did they come from?” I breathed.

Mikey snickered.

He was a nice kid but sometimes he irritated me. Right then I envied him his lack of experience. I'd spent too long on too many worlds mired in relentless cosmic cruelty. It had distanced me, numbed me. Of late I'd been comfortably losing altitude on the long glide to early retirement. Now was not the time to find what I'd been searching for all my life.

“What are they made of?”

“Can't say for sure yet, I was just getting the bounce beam ready. Marble possibly.”

“How many clicks to the nearest outcrop?”

“Just over twenty, and yeah they've got a channel open.”

The granite caldera was about fifty clicks in diameter and the water at the bottom was up to fifty metres deep. Until now this had been big enough for the Bugs who were about the size of your thumb. Big enough while they were blowing each other away in numberless wars, but not if they were starting to attain real social cohesion.

They looked like amoebae but weren't. Rather than evolving out like true amoebae they'd evolved in. Their single-celled bodies had gained greater internal complexity. Right at the start we'd bagged one of the little runts and analysed it, thankfully taking full biohazard precautions. We weren't biologists but our on-board AIs were pretty smart and, after their examination, pretty shocked. The cell was a mass of subnuclei

that communicated with each other mainly by percussion arrays, sending pulses through the intracellular fluid. Apart from the similarity in appearance, and the fact that it was DNA and carbon-based, it had little in common with the terrestrial amoeba.

“Let me see the channel!”

Mikey blinked up the sat-view. The channel lay like a transparent snake caught in mid-slither across the uneven terrain. It skirted the small hills and larger depressions and the clumps of sage-like plants so common on this part of the planet.

We'd seen its like before but rarely on this scale. Hundreds of channels led out between breaks in the caldera's walls making it look from the air like a giant glass octopus.

Though you could kill the better part of a score of bugs in one incautious step they ruled this mudball. Apart from plants and a few “controlled” species everything else had been eradicated. We'd found fossil evidence of vertebrates that had spread out from the other hemisphere. They'd been doing okay until they'd met the Bugs, then they'd disappeared in the flick of a geological eyelid.

I did a quick mental calculation based on the pit's calibration grids. Their pyramids would be even larger to them than ours were to us.

I tried to keep my voice even. “Want to estimate the cusp point?”

Mikey turned to look at me. His leaf patterning was now in autumn, giving his skin a disturbingly scalded appearance. “A month, maybe less.”

“They may not make it.”

He regarded me thoughtfully. I shuffled my sparse frame, knowing I'd lived too long and too closely with Mikey to have any success with the Emeritus Professor of Neuroarchaeology act.

“I don't get it, Dan. Why are you so...? I mean forget TV Specials. Screw the Nobel. We'll be up there with Darwin!”

I shrugged, casting around for a metaphor. It wasn't easy. “Remember your first time with a woman? You'd probably had to work pretty hard to get her where you wanted her. You'd had to overcome all your shyness and selfconsciousness. Then when everything was set, when it was all arranged and the door was about to swing open, you suddenly found you didn't want to know. Remember that?”

“Nope.”

The Way Into the Wendy House

Barrington J. Bayley

Forget about Ludlow, and Clun, and Bridgnorth, and those other pretty townships of south Shropshire. Drive aimlessly round the Wrekin, a hill just short of being a mountain, through Eaton Constantine as though going nowhere, and Little Wenlock, until you come to Wrockwardine Wood, and finally to Donnington Wood. Go down the slope from St Matthew's Church, past the old disused Victorian school building, and at the bottom a rough track leads off the road, revealing two Duke of Sutherland cottages. At its end, screened by beech trees so that the lighted sign and windows show only at a certain angle, you will find the Bell Inn. Now you have come to the vacant centre of the world, through which all human beings pass at some time, though they are rarely noticed.

The Bell Inn itself is at least two centuries old, and at one time was a real inn, with its own coach house. Fifty years ago its clientele would have consisted of the tenants of the since-demolished coal-miners' terrace and a scattering of farm labourers. Since then the area has become better populated and its fortunes have been chequered: at most times a rural rough-house, sometimes nearly deserted, now and then reviving to become convivial and well-frequented, under a succession of landlords.

Mention should be made of the ghosts which nearly all resident landlords and landladies claim to have seen. Most frequently reported is a tall man in a three-cornered hat, glimpsed standing at the end of the bar or wandering about in the living quarters upstairs.

When I first took to frequenting the Bell, I spoke to no one. I regarded myself as superior to the Donnington folk, none of whom were science-fiction fans. Instead I used my pub time as my reading time, sitting at a table conveniently close to the bar and immersing myself in science-fiction novels borrowed from the local library while swallowing a few pints of Tetley's bitter. On the whole people would leave me in peace. It was vaguely annoying, therefore, when the young man I later came to know as Alan began to approach me with a shy grin, asking if what I was reading was a good book. He had read some science fiction, he said, and mentioned one or two of the more commonly known authors. I responded politely but distantly, not wanting to encourage him. He might well have read some science fiction, but that did not make him a fan. A true fan is soon recognizable by another of his kind (rather as homosexuals are said to be able

to recognize one another) and I could see that he was not one. Probably he was a little more intelligent than the general run of locals, but that was to say nothing at all.

One evening I entered the lounge of the Bell to be assailed by an overpowering din. The landlord had hired an entertainer. I was hovering in displeased manner near the door when Alan (whose name I did not as yet know) raised his glass in greeting from where he was sitting near by, and managed to make himself understood over the racket created by an amplified guitar, drum machine, and a yowling rendition of *The Crystal Chandelier*. “Shall we go into the bar where it's quieter?”

I nodded, resigning myself to the fact that he had succeeded in negotiating the transition from near-stranger to drinking acquaintance. To tell the truth the bar of the Bell is a more pleasant place than the lounge, if one can leave aside the roughness of its habitués. It is in the oldest part of the building. Broad, patient oak beams support the low ceiling. In winter a wood fire casts a warm glow. I bought myself a pint from one of the hand-pulled pumps and stood in silence, gazing at the counter, not wishing to be the one to initiate a conversation. Alan's opening gambit came as a surprise.

“Did you hear that talk on philosophy on Radio Three last Wednesday evening?”

Slowly I lifted my head and focused my gaze on a blank spot on the wall. It is hard to describe the feeling of disorientation which came over me at that moment. Having been so long confirmed in the conviction that the Donnington people are all morons, their mental horizons never extending beyond the activities of stealing, fighting one another, and the botched repair of unroadworthy cars, it seemed entirely incongruous to be hearing what Alan had just said. Recovering my sense of reality, I told myself that he had probably heard some fragment of the talk accidentally while fiddling with the radio dial, and now thought to “butter me up” by referring to it.

“Yes,” I answered. Loftily, still somewhat adrift in my mind, I went on to explain that the subject of the talk, which as it happened I had listened to closely, was one of the oldest questions in all philosophy. Stated in different terms, it had exercised the ancient Greeks: whether gross materiality is the fundamental stuff of existence, or some other principle. Pausing,